WEBCT CAN BENEFIT YOU AND YOUR STUDENTS

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Abstract

Teachers should consider using a web-based platform, such as WebCT, to enhance their regular face-to-face classes. WebCT and other similar systems offer many benefits to teachers and students in traditional settings. Students can benefit by being able to view slides or notes they missed in the regular class-room. They can also benefit from the increased rapport established in threaded discussions and chat features. Visual learners can benefit from the extra opportunity to see and review PowerPoint presentations or other materials used in class. Teachers benefit because they can use WebCT to help them stay on schedule if they must miss a class. Teachers can easily provide self-check questions or other extra material. WebCT can also make testing and receiving assignments easier for the teacher. Teachers can learn to use WebCT effectively in a short amount of time and with little effort.

Introduction

WebCT (Web Course Tools) is an interactive course management system usually used for online courses (e-learning). It was developed in the computer science department of the University of British Columbia, and it is now owned by a private company with offices in Massachusetts and British Columbia. The ease of learning how to use WebCT also makes it very appropriate for teachers to use as an enhancement for a face-to-face class. A major benefit for teachers is that they do not

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have to learn HTML to use WebCT. Most teachers create content offline using Microsoft applications such as FrontPage, Word, and PowerPoint.

WebCT is currently being used in over 2,200 universities and 80 countries, and is available in 14 languages. Several major textbook companies, such as Allyn & Bacon, Glencoe, Irwin/McGraw-Hill and Prentice Hall, provide WebCT-ready material to supplement their textbooks. "WebCT is used by more institutions throughout the world than any other course management system" (WebCT, 2004, p. 3). As distance learning benefits are recognized, more and more universities are choosing WebCT. Gartner Research, a leader in research on the global IT industry, reported that 73% of campuses surveyed had selected only one course management system; and that of those selecting only one system, 38% had selected WebCT (WebCT, 2003). For example, California State University uses WebCT because "by integrating a web-based interface with traditional classroom learning, we have created new pedagogical opportunities." They also feel that "learning online can add a new dimension of interactivity to your classes" (Why Do I Need, 2004, p. 1).

A survey conducted by WebCT of 150 United Kingdom lecturers found that those surveyed believed e-learning improved teaching creativity and student learning success. They reported that 94% of the respondents agreed with the statement that "classroom-based teaching and online learning is more effective than classroom-based teaching alone." "Online learning has the potential to bring new opportunities to higher education," according to Stuart Hirst, Teacher Fellow at Leeds Metropolitan University (Wearden, 2004, p. 1).

According to the head of United Nations University (UNU) - Online Learning and an educational technologist for UNU (Barrett & Patron, 2002), many students also spend more time on task, have higher levels of motivation, and have reduced test anxiety when using e-learning as opposed to traditional classroom learning. Nettles, Dzuiban, Cioffe, and Moskel (as cited in Barrett & Patron, 2002), of the University of Central Florida, examined 49 studies comparing online learning

with traditional learning. They found in nearly 30% of the studies that online learning had positive outcomes for students, such as improved grades and higher percentage of homework completed.

Benefits to Students

As stated above, students can benefit from online learning; therefore, students can benefit if teachers use WebCT to enhance traditional classroom-based classes. One benefit for many students is the opportunity to view material covered during a class they missed. Many of today's college students are non-traditional students with families and jobs. Even many of the traditional students have jobs to help them pay for their college expenses, and some of these students also have families. Because of all of these demands on their time, even the "good" student occasionally misses class. Teachers can easily post the PowerPoint slides or notes they used in class. Students can then review what they missed. Teachers can choose to post limited slides or notes to diminish the temptation of students to miss class and to just depend on the material on WebCT.

A second benefit is that students who attended class can benefit from a review of the slides. Students who are visual learners can especially benefit from this second opportunity to see and learn the material.

A third benefit is that students can build rapport with other students through the threaded discussion tool or chatrooms in WebCT. The teacher can post a topic and let students respond and give feedback to each other. These somewhat less personal ways of communicating may be particularly beneficial for shy students. Although some people feel online courses take away from the human interaction, with planning the teacher actually can create increased interaction between students as well as between students and teacher.

An extra benefit for the students occurs when the teacher uses WebCT to enhance a regular class. Students learn to use WebCT in an environment where they can easily obtain help if needed, and when their whole grade is not dependent on their learning to use WebCT.

Benefits to Teachers

WebCT also benefits the teacher. One benefit is that a teacher can post a lecture online if they cannot be in class because they are attending a conference or because they are ill. Students can go online and "attend class." This feature can save the teacher from falling behind the planned schedule for covering course content.

A second benefit of WebCT for teachers is that all assignments can be submitted to the teacher through WebCT e-mail. This makes it much easier for teachers to find, evaluate and respond to assignments, as opposed to their searching for them in their regular e-mail inboxes, where they may be accidentally deleted.

A third benefit for teachers using WebCT is that they can provide self-check and sample questions online for students. The teacher can also use WebCT for testing. Students can go online and take the test at a specific time and for a specific length of time. The teacher can set up the answer key for an objective test and the computer will score the test for immediate or almost immediate feedback, with the teacher controlling when the feedback is given to the students.

How to Learn WebCT

Many universities offer classes or workshops in WebCT. WebCT.com also provides a tutorial and excellent information to guide the teacher in learning to use WebCT for the first time or when using WebCT for something new. Good documentation such as that available in *The Ultimate WebCT Handbook* (Rehbert, Ferguson, & McQuillan, 2003) also makes learning how to use the system very easy. Instruction followed by practice is the best way to learn to use WebCT.

Special Concerns

There are some simple special typing rules for WebCT which make it more likely that students with different browsers and different software will see exactly what the teacher sees. Attention to the way the document is formatted and saved will help teachers ensure their students easily receive readable materials.

Teachers using WebCT should also be aware of the need to ensure accessibility for all students, so that the Americans with Disabilities Act and federal 508 guidelines are met. The World Wide Web Consortium's Web Accessibility Initiative develops guidelines on creating accessible websites and online courses. The World Wide Web Consortium (W3C) was created in 1994 to develop common protocols for information on the world wide web. Their guidelines cover things such as screen readability and navigation. More information about their guidelines can be found at www.w3.org (World Wide Web Consortium, 2004). The Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) requires courses to be accessible, equally engaging, and allowing for equal participation by all students and before the students ask (Rehbert, Ferguson, & McQuillan, 2003). Sites such as http://bobby.watchfire.com/bobby/html/en/index.jsp offer a free check of WebCT materials to ensure that all materials are accessible and meet the current standards of W3C and ADA (Watchfire Corporation, 2004).

Conclusion

WebCT offers many other features. However, first-time users of WebCT should plan to start by adding only one or two aspects for their first use. If first-time users are fortunate enough to have good technical support, they might choose to be more creative and daring.

Teachers who are willing to spend just a little time reading and experimenting can integrate WebCT into their face-to-face class. Then, when teachers are asked to create a completely online class they will be ready.

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